

OPTIMISM Hopes rise for good news on PGDP re-use proposal

The Paducah Sun editorial

Nov 20, 2013

A pall has hovered over McCracken County in recent months, growing gloomier since June with the phasing out of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant and the start of a gradual, year-long layoff of the 1,100-person workforce. The loss of so many high-paying jobs is already causing ripple effects in the regional economy.

But local officials have hinted strongly in recent days that better days may be near at hand. Hope is on the horizon.

Reason: word that the U.S. Department of Energy may soon be announcing a re-use plan for the PGDP site. Economic development officials say the announcement could come by Thanksgiving.

Sens. Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul, along with Rep. Ed Whitfield, all of whom have applied consistent pressure on the DOE to act, issued a joint statement last week voicing their confidence that an announcement is imminent. We don't think they would risk raising false hopes.

Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce President Sandra Wilson says the impending announcement brings a "great sense of hope."

GE Hitachi Global Laser Enrichment appears to have been selected from among the companies that submitted re-use plans. The firm wants to bring its laser technology to the plant site to re-enrich depleted uranium tails, the waste product of 60 years of enrichment, stored at the site. Other companies also had proposals for re-enriching the tails, but not all at the Paducah plant site; some would have transported the material to another state.

GE Hitachi's proposal will not replace all the lost jobs — it may provide a few hundred — but it would at least mitigate the impact of employment losses. Add the post-shutdown cleanup work that must be conducted at the federal government-owned site, and the net job losses could be much smaller than feared.

The DOE owns the 3,556-acre site and leases it to the United States Enrichment Corporation, a private company created by the federal government. Its diffusion technology is obsolete, and the shutdown has been anticipated since the 1990s.

Economic developers, local and state officials, along with Kentucky's congressional delegation, have lobbied the DOE hard to approve a re-use plan for the site. But the department did not even advertise for requests of interest until this year. The previous secretary of energy, Steven Chu, showed indifference bordering on contempt for nuclear power in general and the Paducah plant in particular.

But new Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz appears to have been more responsive. Local officials were encouraged after meeting with Moniz this fall.

The announcement has not yet come, and there's many a slip twixt cup and lip. But those with an inside view are buoyed by what they hear. The region has reason to be optimistic.